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Kevin Clouter

When Michael and Elaine arrived at Cape Cod Hospital, Michael didn't know there was a tumor the size of a golf ball in his brother's head. His brother had said it was nothing too serious, and Michael was surprised to see Connor's head completely shaven, to find he'd lost nearly ten pounds. Before Michael could say anything, Connor pointed to his temple and relayed the facts that Doctor Saramago had given him: the tumor was malignant, it needed to be removed, and the procedure could be dangerous.

Michael put his hand on the edge of Connor's bed. "How did you get so skinny?" he asked.

"They don't feed me here," Connor said. "My insurance won't cover it."

"You look like you're from the future with that haircut."

Connor put his hand on his head and shook it. "Outlook hazy. Try again later."

Michael looked at Elaine, who was standing along the back wall of the room. Her face was turned toward the door, as though, out of politeness, she hadn't been listening. They'd been together for two years, but this was the first time they'd gone to Barnstable, where he grew up. She said little on the drive down from Boston, and when they were in the elevator on the way to the third floor, she offered to wait outside.

"Can you feel it?" Michael asked.

"It feels like calculus."

"Jesus, Connor. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm twenty-five years old." He pushed the sheets off his chest, revealing a thin blue gown. Michael watched Connor's chest rise when he inhaled. "I still can't believe it."

"Who knows?"

"Dad doesn't know."

Michael rubbed his hand along the sheets to see where Connor's legs were before he sat. He tried to imagine it, having a golf ball in his head. There were, he knew, all sorts of shocking things about the human body. Was it the small intestine that was thirty feet long? But this was different;

tumors weren't organs or bones. As a child, he'd had a book on Louis Pasteur that showed the rabies vaccine as a line of French soldiers, and the rabies as menacing, oversized bugs. It was clear that the bugs had little business inside the sick boy's body, and the soldiers bayoneted them heroically.

"Here's what I'm thinking," Michael said. "I'm thinking we're going to get you through this."

"I'm high as a kite. I should tell you that."

"I thought they might have you on something."

"Tranquilizers. I begged for them, thinking they'd be stingy, but they handed them right over."

"When is the surgery?"

"Two days. It was supposed to be this afternoon."

Michael looked at his watch; he had a habit of doing that when anyone mentioned an important date or time. His office found it funny, and he knew it seemed affected, but the motion had become so instinctual he could rarely stop himself. Michael looked up and took in for the first time the sparseness of the room. There were no other beds, and only rosary beads and a book—Yaz: Baseball, the Wall, and Me—sat on the bedside table. The window curtains were pulled open, but the winter sky was so gray it darkened the room's fluorescent lighting. None of the technology Michael associated with hospitals—heart monitors, electronically adjustable beds, a television bolted to the ceiling—was in the room. It didn't seem like a room to die in, but it didn't seem like a room to live in, either.

"Where's the closest hotel?" Michael asked. "We'll stay there."

Connor sat up in the bed. "You visited. That's enough. There's no reason to stay."

"We'd like to stay," Elaine said. "You shouldn't be alone."

"I'm used to being alone."

Michael waited for Connor to say something about Elaine's husband, but he didn't. He sighed and gathered the sheets around his neck. Elaine leaned forward and touched the sheets where his feet pushed up.

"You shouldn't be alone," she repeated.

Michael had forgotten how few hotels stay open past Labor Day. He assumed they would settle on one of the plainer motels off 28, but after an hour driving around town, he had to pull up to a parking lot payphone

and search the yellow pages. The hotel he found wasn't far from the hospital, which made sense, but annoyed him in a way that felt petty and selfish.

Michael and Elaine had packed a bag with a change of clothes in case they decided to stay the night. It was a precaution against fatigue more than anything else. When Connor had called Michael the night before, he sounded annoyed but not worried. Just something that needs to come out, was the way he put it. Michael pressed further, and when Connor became defensive, Michael dropped it, saying only that he and Elaine would come down the next morning. Connor agreed begrudgingly, though it was clear to Michael that this was why he called in the first place.

In the hotel room, Michael watched Elaine lay out their clean clothes on the bed. Michael was standing beside the heater beneath the window. He turned the heat to high, and warm blasts of air crashed around his chin and ears.

"You're surprised," she said.

"Of course I am." Michael thumbed the window curtain, which was thick and shabby.

"I had a feeling. Last night, I mean. When he called."

"I figured it was his appendix—something like that. I figured he was embarrassed by the whole thing."

"You should talk to him."

"We're not big talkers. We're not—" Michael searched for the right word. He was feeling defensive, now, and he wanted to be as precise as possible. "We're not close like that."

He turned to the window. There were only a few cars in the parking lot, and he wondered how many of the people were here because of the hospital. It was too soon for something like this to happen, and he couldn't lose the feeling that it should be him there, if only because he was older. In CCD growing up, he had told Father Murphy that he would sacrifice his life to save his brother's. The priests were always asking impossible questions—if you could save your life or your brother's, whose would it be?—so as to gauge their character, and Michael assumed that this was the correct answer. His reason, and it seemed perfectly logical, was that his younger brother had more life left. Father Murphy nodded skeptically, and Michael thought of his face as he saw his own reflection in the glass.

"I think you should go by yourself tomorrow," Elaine said.

"I want you there."

"You want me there, but Connor needs to talk to you. He can't talk to you the same with me there."

There was a chain link fence on the perimeter of the parking lot, and beyond the fence, a creek surrounded by trees. A few boys were smoking cigarettes along the edge of the creek, and Michael watched them, wondering where they had come from and what was on the other side of the trees. The boys lit new cigarettes from the tips of their old ones and threw the butts into the water dismissively.

"He might die." Michael didn't move his eyes from the window.

"What a thing to say."

"That's a possibility, though."

"Listen." Elaine's hands were on the side of his abdomen. She pushed her face into the back of his neck. She didn't say anything else.

"I registered under my name at the desk. As husband and wife. I wasn't going to but then I did."

"I wish you hadn't done that."

Michael turned around so that he was facing her. "They gave me the sheet, and I just wrote it in that way."

The next day, Connor was restless and alert. The tranquilizers, it seemed, had been abandoned.

"Can you believe these doctors? Now, they say Tuesday." Connor crossed his arms morosely. "It would be one thing if my nurses were beautiful."

"They're pushing back your date to be as careful as possible." Michael had no idea whether or not this was true.

Connor eyed Michael suspiciously. "Did you bring me flowers?"

"I brought you a cheeseburger." Michael held up the grease-stained bag.

"You need to eat something."

"I can't keep anything down. I'm too nervous. I haven't eaten a thing since I found out."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Oh, Jesus."

"What?"

"Did Elaine put you up to this? Are we supposed to have some big pow-wow?"

"I'm just worried about you."

"I'm worried about me, too. What do you want? I was having these headaches, and they wouldn't stop. The doctors ran some tests and then they told me it was a tumor. It wasn't the first thing I would have guessed."

Michael put the bag on the bedside table. There was a vase with yellow roses there now, and he tried to spot a tag without being obvious.

"Your girlfriend send these?" Michael fingered one of the roses.

"My girlfriend of five weeks." Connor scratched the back of his head. The gesture was more pronounced without his hair. "I wouldn't want to be in her shoes, either."

Michael nodded, trying to seem understanding without allowing her too much sympathy.

"Did Elaine leave already?"

"She's at the hotel. She thought we should be alone."

Connor reached over to take the bag. He peered into it skeptically then put it back on the table. "Did her divorce go through yet?"

"He's not making it easy."

Connor stretched his arms out and cracked his knuckles. It seemed like the movement of a healthy person, and Michael was glad to see it. "You know what I think," Connor said.

"They've been separated for three years."

"You won't be able to marry in the Church." To emphasize the tragedy of this he repeated himself. "You won't."

Michael didn't want to get into it again and he didn't want to seem upset. He went to the corner of the room and dragged a chair to the foot of Connor's bed. Here, he was forced to look at his brother straight on, which was something he'd avoided. Connor looked sick and he didn't. His face was thinner, and with the bald head he seemed vaguely sinister, like a comic book villain. But he'd always been lean, and off the tranquilizers, his eyes were quick and his speech confident. There was an authority in the way he moved his legs beneath the sheets, as if to remind Michael that there were things he couldn't see about him.

"Have you been praying?" Michael asked.

"It hasn't made the tumor any smaller." Connor paused. "But it's helped."

Connor absently picked up the rosary beads and rubbed one between his thumb and forefinger. It didn't look like he was praying. Michael didn't know what he was doing. After a few seconds, Connor placed the beads

back on the table, beside the flowers.

"I was thinking," Connor began. "I have lots of time to do that lately."

Michael leaned forward to show that he was listening.

"Do you remember Paula Daltrey? We went to high school with her."

"Paula? Sure." The name sounded familiar.

"There you go. Well, I was thinking about her. She was very beautiful."

"Not like the nurses." Michael waited until Connor smiled before he did, too.

"We went ice skating once. Did you know that?"

"I don't think so."

"We did. On that cranberry bog where we used to play hockey."

After harvest was over each October, the bog was flooded to protect the berries from frost. The bog froze over better than any of the ponds or rivers nearby, which were too brackish to skate on safely, and he and Connor and some other boys would play after school until the sky became a dimness they couldn't navigate through. There were no nets, and there was always a boy who didn't have skates, who promised he could play without them. That was, what, ten years ago? Twelve? Even at twenty-seven, Michael was able to imagine the transgression—the thrill—it must have been to bring a girl to that place.

"Why were you thinking of Paula Daltrey?" Michael asked.

"You lie here all day, waiting for the doctor to visit, sort of drifting in and out of sleep, and these things just pop into your head."

"Maybe that golf ball's pushing a button in your brain." He pretended to push a button in the air with his finger. It was a calculated risk.

"Maybe." Connor laughed. "Maybe I'll come out of surgery a genius!"

"My brother the genius!" Michael wanted it to be like this: he and Connor laughing about things, everything not so bad.

"Or maybe I'll come out a vegetable. That could happen, too."

"That won't happen."

Connor nodded gravely, and the back of Michael's eyes burned. The wave of sadness surprised him: not because it was unexpected, but because it was so savage and short-lived. For a moment, Michael was certain that everything was hopeless.

"Do you remember when Mom was in the hospital?" Connor asked. "It was this hospital."

"I was thinking of that." He hadn't been but he felt like he should have

been.

"Nobody thought she was going to die, and then she did."

It was a strange thing to say, and Michael opened his mouth slightly. In agreement or disagreement, he wasn't sure.

"All we ever talk about is women," Connor said. He seemed pleased with this statement.

"Even when the woman's our mother," Michael added.

"Paula Daltrey, though. She was something." Connor shook his bald head. "You should remember her."

"I think I remember her."

"No. You'd know."

Connor was right. Michael had decided he couldn't remember Paula Daltrey after all, though he wished he could.

"I'm going to eat this," Michael said, standing and pulling the cheeseburger out of the bag, "if you're not."

Doctor Saramago knocked on the open door before coming in. He was a handsome man with an uncomfortable smile that Michael guessed he wore all day. When he saw Michael he extended his hand to him and turned toward Connor. "The brother?" he asked.

"That's what our mother told us."

"Well, you look alike."

Michael felt ridiculous holding the cheeseburger. He slid it into the bag and moved to the back wall to give his brother and the doctor space.

Doctor Saramago tapped a clipboard with a pen. Michael thought about the command in that clipboard; from it, he could see who was going to make it and who wasn't, whether someone's headaches were migraines or a tumor. Was it awful, Michael wondered, to know those things? When patients looked at Doctor Saramago, did he value being the person who knew what the result was, how long it was going to be, what the percentages were?

"You're welcome to stay," Doctor Saramago said. It took Michael a second to realize he was speaking to him.

"I should be going." Michael reached for his coat and the bag. He didn't know if Connor wanted him there or not. It was easiest to go.

Michael waved to Connor, who lifted his right hand, and headed for the door. Halfway down the hall, Michael veered into one of the waiting rooms. He sat, and using his fingers as beads, began to say a rosary to him-

self. But realizing that he was improvising, that he couldn't remember the procession, he snapped his hand shut and left for the parking lot.

On Monday, the third day, Elaine agreed to come with Michael. "You don't have to do anything special," she said in the hospital elevator. "He appreciates you just being here."

"Just being here," Michael said. "That isn't enough."

She was driving back to Boston the next morning. There was a presentation that her office said it couldn't do without her. Earlier at the hotel, Michael had watched her straining on the phone. "No, it's not my brother." She was dancing around "boyfriend," a word that sounded trite, especially in the context of tragedy. "He's very close to me, and it's a serious operation."

Michael was surprised to find the door to Connor's room closed. He looked at Elaine, who shrugged, and knocked twice. There was a muffling of voices inside and a chair leg scraping against tile. When his father opened the door, Michael's first instinct was to ask how his mother was doing.

"We weren't expecting you just yet," his father said.

"What are you doing here?"

"My son is in the hospital. You thought I wouldn't come?"

Michael pushed the door all the way open and stepped into the room. A priest was leaning forward, listening to Connor, who was talking quickly. Michael turned around to look at his father, who clasped his hands in front of him, as if about to enter into a long story. He was even fatter than Michael remembered. Elaine stood in the doorway, unsure of where to go.

"Father McAllister is an old family friend," his father said. "He was happy to come."

"It's all right." Connor was sitting up. "Really, Michael. Take off your coat."

"You can ask him to leave." Michael gestured at his father. "You can do that."

"Take off your coat. Take Elaine's coat." Connor waved to the doorway. Michael unzipped his coat but didn't take it off. Elaine squeezed past his father and walked toward Michael. He hadn't seen his father since his mother's funeral. His relationship with him had always been tense, and when his mother died, they had little reason to keep in touch. The last

time he called Michael was to tell him he was marrying his mistress of ten years. That was two months after the funeral. But Connor was never as resentful. He continued to talk to their father every few weeks and even went to the wedding. Later Connor said, Well how long did she wait?

"If we stand around Connor, we can join in prayer." Father McAllister sounded slightly impatient. Michael wondered how long he'd been here, whether or not he had others to visit in the hospital.

Elaine leaned her face up to Michael's ear. "I can't take the Host," she whispered.

"You can't what?"

She lowered her voice so that it was barely audible. "I can't take the Host, and you shouldn't either. Neither of us has been to Mass in years."

Michael nodded. It hadn't occurred to him that Father McAllister was about to administer the Host, that this was why his father had asked him to come.

After making the Sign of the Cross, Father McAllister began a prayer, and Michael mouthed the words in the distant but respectful way he mouthed the national anthem at baseball games. Connor and their father prayed with Father McAllister, but their father spoke too loudly, as if to remind the room that he knew the words.

Father McAllister placed his hands on Connor's head. His hands were dark with liver spots, and in contrast, Connor's bald head appeared oddly sleek and youthful. Father McAllister anointed Connor's forehead with oil and took his hands to anoint them, as well. Michael clenched his fists, thinking of how he would sometimes spill olive oil on his hands cooking and how he would rub it off quick on his jeans.

Father McAllister took out a plain container, not much smaller than a pocket watch, from which he produced the Host. As Father McAllister finished the prayer and placed the Host on Connor's tongue, Michael marvelled at how modern the container seemed—at how ordinary and sad the whole ceremony was in a brightly lit hospital room.

And through this, how could Michael describe his father's false humility? He held his tongue out like it was a thing he'd never realized he had.

When Father McAllister turned to Elaine, she crossed her arms and hands over her chest, which was a gesture he recognized. Michael did the same, and as Father McAllister lowered his head to put away the container, Connor burst out: "What are you doing?"

"I can't receive," Michael said.

"Are you Buddhist now?"

"I haven't been to Mass in years." Michael looked at Father McAllister. "It isn't right, is it Father?"

Father McAllister put his hand over his closed mouth—his index finger touching his nose, his pinky dangling from his chin—and Michael's father shook his head sympathetically.

"You're still Catholic," Connor said.

"That isn't the point," Michael said. "I'm not in a state of grace."

"You must be in a state of grace to receive," Father McAllister said.

Connor glared at Michael as if his statement were a trump card, and somehow a betrayal. Michael knew that refusing the Host wasn't the betrayal; refusing the Church was. Connor could pardon their father's infidelity, he could even come to accept Elaine's divorce, but Michael's breach was one that he could never forgive. Not when it was so voluntary and reversible. How could Connor ever understand why someone would walk away from his salvation? What did it mean to say to a believer, "I want to believe but I can't?" There was no consolation in that, not for Connor or Michael.

"I'm going to leave now," Michael said. "That might be best."

"That might," Connor agreed.

Michael zipped up his coat. He had expected an objection and wasn't quite sure what to do with this.

"Take care," Elaine said. She took one of Connor's hands and gripped it. Michael watched carefully; Connor didn't grip back. He was angry, or maybe hurt, and Michael didn't want to leave.

Michael didn't say anything on the walk back to the car. He moved slowly through the hallways, and when they got inside the car, Elaine laid her hands flat on the dashboard and said: "We can stay here for a while. If it makes you feel better, we can stay."

"What does that even mean: state of grace?"

"It doesn't have to mean anything. It's strange being in a room like that with a priest. It was strange for me, too."

"You knew what to do." Michael crossed his arms over his chest. His left elbow bumped the steering wheel. "Where did you learn that?"

"I don't know. Maybe I saw someone do it once. It's not important."

Michael looked at Elaine. She was staring blankly at her hands, which

were dry and tough from the cold. That night, she would rub moisturizer over them from a tube the size of his thumb, and remind him that if she didn't, they would bleed. She would have to leave early the next morning. She'd want to go to her apartment first: to shower and change her clothes. Really, it would make more sense to leave now, this afternoon, but she wouldn't do that. For him, she would stay. She'd get a wake-up call at five and be gone by five-thirty. She would dress quietly in the dark, wash her face in the bathroom, pull her hair into a ponytail, and lift his head off the pillow to kiss him before she left. And what would she think about during the drive? Would she worry over Connor, over him worrying about Connor? Or would she have selfish thoughts—how does this affect me?—and stop herself, actually slam her palm against the steering wheel driving over the Sagamore Bridge, to say, “be more understanding, try and see this from Connor's point of view?” Or was this all just his own limited way of thinking? Simple and foolish. A waste of time with his brother a five minute walk away, maybe imagining this as the last full day of his life.

“I'd like to go to Sandy Neck,” Michael said, reaching for Elaine's hand. “It's not far from here.”

“All right. We can do that. Why?”

“Because we're here right now, and we can go to Sandy Neck.”

Elaine smiled, but Michael could barely understand it himself. She reached for her seatbelt with her free hand, and just as it clicked into the buckle, he leaned forward to kiss her.

It was easier, Michael realized, to talk about their father. Easier to marvel with Connor at their father's visit the day before than talk about the obvious. Michael was glad for the drama. He could almost convince himself he was glad his father had come. Anything was better than talking about the surgery. He'd intentionally left his watch at the hotel, but he still knew how much longer it was. He decided on the walk over that he would give his brother the last hour to himself.

“Dad looked like hell, huh?” Connor drummed his abdomen with his fingers.

“It wasn't his fighting weight,” Michael said.

“He's pushing two-fifty anyhow.”

“I can see straight through you.” Michael pointed to Connor's belly, where his fingers were still tapping. When Connor looked down to exam-

ine himself, Michael wished he hadn't said it. “You'll have some steaks to eat when you get out of here.”

“You treating, rich man? I'll take two.”

Michael nodded. He would buy his brother a steak. And if they went to a bar afterwards, he would buy the pitchers, smiling when his brother began to feel them. Connor was his younger brother; Michael didn't see how that could change.

“Elaine's coming back tonight. After work. We'll both be here when you come to.”

“I like Elaine.” Connor paused. “I hope you don't think I don't.”

“I know you like her.”

“I just don't like that she's married.”

“You don't like that she's separated.”

Connor moved his bald head from side to side. It was an acknowledgment more than a concession. But Michael wasn't offended. He knew that, in a way, Connor meant it politely.

“You should go to Mass again.” Connor scratched his nose, and Michael could see that Connor's hand was shaking. “Even if you can't marry, you should go.”

“We can marry.”

“There's a church in your neighborhood. I looked it up.”

“I was thinking death bed repentance.”

“That's dicey.”

“Oscar Wilde did it.”

“Oscar Wilde did a lot of things. You don't want to play that game with Oscar Wilde.”

Michael walked to the bedside table. He hadn't been able to sit since he'd come. There was a second bouquet of flowers on the table, and he wondered if his father had brought it, if it had been there the day before. He reached into the bouquet for a card. There wasn't one. The flowers were already dry and faded. “When did you call Dad?” he asked.

“I was loopy when I called him. The tranquilizers, you know.”

“I don't mind.”

“I'm sorry for the way things went yesterday. It didn't have to be like that.”

“It's all right. Really.”

“I've been thinking about things. I wrote a little will. How ridiculous is

that?" Connor lifted his book off the table. There was a single piece of paper underneath it, which he handed to Michael. "You're in it. You get my good looks."

Michael looked at the paper. In an uneven script, halfway down the page, was written: Catholic burial. In Mom's cemetery, if possible. Use my money. There was nothing else on the paper.

"This is ridiculous," Michael said.

"Just be in charge."

Michael folded the paper in fours and placed it in his back pocket. He knew instantly that the paper was something he would have for the rest of his life. "You'll be fine."

"If you'll excuse me, I have an appointment."

"Two steaks. My treat."

Connor held up two fingers, and Michael leaned down to hug him. Connor's arms felt thin—thinner than they actually were—and Michael tried to imagine being his brother.

Michael's father was in the parking lot when Michael got back to the hotel. His father was leaning against his car like he wished he were smoking a cigarette.

"What's this?" Michael said as soon as he was close enough.

"Connor said you were staying here."

"He goes under any minute."

"I meant to stop by." His father coughed into his fist. "I couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Elaine and I are going later. You can come."

"It's difficult for me. It was difficult with your mother. I still remember that."

Michael tugged at his scarf. The weather had been cold since he'd been on Cape, and now a sharp wind was rolling empty coffee cups around the parking lot. His father had on a bulky winter coat and hat, though he didn't seem as large against the wide flat plane of asphalt. If his father had apologized right then, Michael would have taken him back. Michael wanted to think that he could read concern on his father's face. He would have been content to read anger or sadness—anything, really—but he couldn't. The truth: his father's face was soft and undoubting, as it had always been. His nose was a little red, but where on some one might sus-

pect drinking, on him it seemed endearing.

"How long have you been waiting out here?" Michael asked.

"Not long." His father kicked a chunk of brown ice from the underside of his car. "Elaine's staying here. Things must be pretty serious."

"She comes back tonight." It pained Michael to hear his father talk like this, to start the conversations they would have if they kept in touch. He briefly considered inviting him to his room, but he knew he wouldn't come. This was goodbye, now, in the parking lot.

"You be good to her. She looks like your mother."

"She doesn't look like Mom."

"A little around the eyes, maybe."

Michael nodded. He would grant him that. It was strange to think about: Elaine had never met his mother. She never would.

"Well, I suppose I'm off." His father pulled his keys from his pocket. Even in the cold, his hands looked delicate. Like a priest's, his mother had said.

"Elaine and I will be there later."

"Like I said. Since your mother—"

"Offer's on the table."

His father nodded and opened the car door. Every time Michael saw him he wondered if it would be the last. They'd never known what to say to each other, how to act. Even when Michael said goodbye, it sounded like a question.

Michael called Elaine as soon as he got back to the room. Nobody picked up, and he figured she was at a meeting. He'd call in a half-hour, and if she wasn't there, he'd call again. He didn't want to leave a message. He wanted control over his voice.

He was hungry. That was something that never happened with Elaine. It wasn't that she always cooked (they tried to split the cooking) just that she made sure they ate. Michael opened the curtains, thinking he could spot a restaurant within walking distance. He couldn't see anything and he was struck, suddenly and awkwardly, with a longing for Elaine's hair, the teeth in her laugh, her small feet. There were hardly any cars in the parking lot. The clouds lay heavy and low, as if the sky had dropped them.

Michael followed the fence along the perimeter of the parking lot with his eyes. The fence was probably five feet high, and a few tree limbs bent over it, running their crippled fingers through the wind. The creek that cut

through the trees had completely frozen over. There were no boys smoking cigarettes this time, no discernable trace that they'd ever been there, and Michael thought of his brother bringing Paula Daltrey to the cranberry bog where they played hockey. He believed Connor that she was beautiful. He saw her with red hair and a wave of freckles across her cheeks that carried over the bridge of her nose. She couldn't skate well but she had her own pair, which was black and sturdy. She didn't mind the cold at all.

Connor had driven her to the cranberry bog without telling her where they were going. She recognized the road they were taking, but then he made a left she'd never made before, and they came to a series of narrow dirt roads. For a second, she was worried. But Paula trusted him in the confident, thoughtless way that sixteen-year-olds will, and when he pulled off the side of the road beside a pine tree, she was only excited. There was a half-hour of sunlight left, and nobody had ever taken her to a place like this.

For his part, Connor was nervous. He'd suggested they go skating without considering whether or not anyone would be there, and now they were walking toward the bog. He was lucky. The bog was empty, and the ice was thick. It all seemed like an omen, though he didn't believe in things like that.

Paula wasn't used to skating outside and she kept stumbling over the thin patches of snow. Connor smiled to show that he was sympathetic, but mostly he wanted to show off. He was a good skater. She watched his runs and quick turns with a combination of pleasure and annoyance, but when he stopped abruptly and took her hands, she thought to herself: this is something you will remember. Connor did not enjoy the same awareness. He knew only that he had to do something. He skated backwards, pulling her with him, and when they began to gain speed, he told her that she had to lead them, that he couldn't see what was behind him, and he couldn't slow down. Paula kept her skates close together—more than once her knees banged against each other—and when she told Connor to turn, she bent her body with the turn.

But how jarring it must have been when he finally tripped, and she came sprawling over him. And how surprising it had to be when, gently lifting her off his chest, he noticed for the first time beneath the ice a faint distant crimson. Michael wondered: did Connor reach over then to show her, or did he give himself time to hold the blur in his head? It must have

seemed like there was so much time. The cold hadn't wet his skin yet, and the sun was still trapped among the pines. Beside him a beautiful girl was tightening her laces, while everywhere beneath them, invisible red fish swam indifferent to the ice.